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ABSTRACT

Attitudes females have toward women's roles and working mothers are examined. Data collected from juniors and senior college students in education reveal the following: college females continue to hold traditional views of women, and a need exists to increase the perception among adolescent females of changing sex roles and opportunities in contemporary society. A non-sexist point of view of career development is presented and recommended as a positive position for professionals and parents to advocate and model. Survey questions and responses are appended. (EFF)

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Adolescent Attitudes toward Working Women

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*Hershel D. Thornburg*

## Adolescent Attitudes Toward Working Women

Dr. Hershel D. Thornburg

Throughout the years in our society many women have been intimidated by the view of men as the dominant group. Their experience has been that men put them down severely, stereotype and label them, and reinforce the idea of male superiority and female dependence. To attain equality with men in the society it has become necessary for women to make major advances in the social, political, occupational, and economic roles. This has been a difficult task, compounded by the firm implantation of male position and the perpetuation of out-of-date stereotypes. One place where alternative values and behaviors can be taught are among the adolescents in the society. This is an important need since so many women are playing roles today quite different from those to which they were socialized. Therefore, to increasing the consistency between role expectation and role fulfillment we should be providing the American female with a contemporary, nonsexist role model.

Adolescent females need to be taught greater self awareness, the relevance of educational training to subsequent adult functioning, a self-concept freer of sex-role emphasis, and a confidence that they have talent and may involve themselves in activities that have been considered male oriented (Thornburg, 1975, 1979). If a mother feels powerless, or if a family structure is paternally autocratic, feelings of inferiority are usually experienced by the female adolescents, and the coping skills they learn are limited. If family relationships are based on male supremacy, both male and female children will gain a limited understanding of themselves as total individuals. Offering the adolescent female a variety of learning and experiential situations will allow her to gain a broader concept of self, so that she will be able to

gain respect and self-esteem through avenues other than marrying a man and rearing a family.

The purpose of this research was to look at attitudes that females are having toward women's roles and working mothers. My interest was stimulated by two studies, one by Entwistle and Greenberger (1972) in Baltimore and <sup>one by</sup> Frye and Dietze (1973) in Nashville which showed that adolescent females held very traditional views toward emerging female roles in the society. As a result, this researcher studied high school juniors and seniors in Tucson in 1974, using the questionnaires devised by Frye and Dietze, and attained virtually the same results. Some comparative data between the Frye and Dietze study and my study in 1974 plus the one presented here are found in Table 2 and will be discussed more later.

Procedures. Subjects for this study were juniors and seniors in the college of education at a major state university. There were no dependent variables in the study although college class and the ages of 20-21 were controlled. Each student was given two scales from the Frye and Dietze (1973) study. The first was a 20-item, four point modified Likert Scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The actual questions are presented in Table 1. The second scale was twenty common occupations in which the subjects were asked to rate their degree of stereotypy by classifying the occupation as either male, female, or both. Actual occupations are listed in Table 3. After controlling for class level and age, the final number of females in the study were 199.

Results. The study was primarily interested in attitudes that college females had toward women's roles and working mothers. The basic purpose

of the study was to draw a college sample and compare it against two other high school samples to see if any differences existed. No hypotheses were generated for this study since it is not a true comparison given that the samples were drawn within different time frames and that only the testing instruments were a constant variable. Nevertheless, it was anticipated that college females would have a more liberal attitude toward women's roles and working women than high school females.

Let me direct you to Table 1. A quick overview of this table indicates that college females continue to express significant traditional views of women in contemporary society. Perhaps, most suprising is the fact that 78 percent agreed that the "most important work for a woman is that of wife and mother," a finding much higher than the high school studies of Frye and Dietz (1973) and Thornburg (1974).

To compare some of the responses between the three studies I direct you to Table 2. Here we can more easily observe how the college sample compared with the high school samples. There were many similarities among the three studies, with percentages being only slightly different. One attitudinal response that again seemed remarkably high for college students<sup>v)</sup> as their agreement with the statement that "Competing with men tends to make a woman less feminine." This was considerably higher than the two high school studies.

Table 3 is different in emphasis inasmuch as it focuses on common occupations and the extent to which they are stereotyped. Again, there was a tendency to agree with the traditional stereotype than support the emerging sex roles. The most noticeable exception was the occupation of "doctor" in which 60 percent responded either and "stenographer" where only 50 percent responded feminine. Perhaps these percentages are lower than they would have been a decade or two

ago. Perhaps not! Studies like this one and the two high school studies cited here point out the need to increase developing adolescent females awareness of changing sex roles and opportunities in contemporary society.

If we literally interpret results from this study it tells us that somewhere along the line we have missed discussing some very important issues with adolescents. When one in four workers in the United States is a mother, the organized women's movement is 20 years old, and the college enrollment for females is approximating 50 percent, one might have expected some changes to have occurred in adolescents by now. Apparently most parents and adults in our society prefer to teach and model traditional sex role differences in their adolescents.

The nonsexist view. In recent years there has been an attempt to present things as being neither masculine nor feminine. This approach avoids labeling something as being for men or women exclusively. Instead, the behavior is thought to be equally appropriate for both sexes. This means that adolescent males who cook or do dishes aren't "sissies." They are just adolescent males who cook and do dishes. It means adolescent females do not have to prepare for a career in a man's world. Rather, she just prepares for a career. There are women chemists and male nurses. There are women athletes and male dancers. And, of course, everyone knows that either sex can present a paper at a convention.

The advantage to the nonsexist view is that it helps break down stereotyping. Sure, there will probably always be more female nurses than male nurses. But it does not require feminine characteristics to be a nurse. I am sure that men will continue to dominate sports broadcast-

ing. But you do not have to be masculine to be a sports announcer. You need to be analytical and have a good speaking voice. Many women possess those abilities. And as we all know by now male and female casino dealers are equally skilled at taking our money. The nonsexist view is more in step with the times and it is a positive position for professional;and parents to advocate and model.

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Table 1  
Extent of Agreement among 189 College Women  
to Selected Women's Role Statements

| Statement                                                                                                                | Percent |          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------|
|                                                                                                                          | Agree   | Disagree |
| 1. Women are happiest when they work for men rather than for other women                                                 | 62      | 38       |
| 2. Men are better in math and mechanical subjects and jobs requiring these skills are better suited to men than to women | 54      | 46       |
| 3. Affectionate, motherly, housewifely women are more admired by men than are career girls                               | 49      | 51       |
| 4. Men are not as nervous as women, therefore, jobs involving a great deal of pressure are better suited to men          | 57      | 43       |
| 5. A career should be more important to a man than to a women                                                            | 49      | 51       |
| 6. The most important work for a woman is that of wife and mother                                                        | 78      | 22       |
| 7. Men generally like women who are not too intelligent or competitive on the job                                        | 48      | 52       |
| 8. Women are more patient than men and jobs requiring patience and repetition are better suited to women than to men.    | 65      | 35       |
| 9. Men are able to control their emotions while women tend to cry when they don't get their way.                         | 57      | 43       |
| 10. Jobs involving a high level of intelligence are better chosen by men than by women                                   | 50      | 50       |
| 11. All women are just a little bit impractical and need the guidance of a man on the job                                | 49      | 51       |
| 12. Men are happier when they are working for men rather than women                                                      | 67      | 33       |
| 13. Women are naturally suited for certain service-oriented jobs                                                         | 71      | 29       |

Table 1--Continued

| Statement                                                                                     | Percent |          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----------|
|                                                                                               | Agree   | Disagree |
| 14. Men make better executives than women because they are more practical and realistic       | 58      | 42       |
| 15. Women should not work outside the home except in cases of financial necessity             | 47      | 53       |
| 16. Men are more aggressive and better suited to leadership positions than are women          | 49      | 51       |
| 17. Competing with men tends to make a woman less feminine                                    | 70      | 30       |
| 18. Men tend to be logical in their thinking while women cannot help being a little illogical | 45      | 55       |
| 19. Some jobs are just naturally suited to men while other jobs are suited to women           | 92      | 8        |
| 20. Women tend to have trouble coping with jobs which involve a great deal of responsibility  | 58      | 42       |

Table 2  
A COMPARISON OF ADOLESCENT FEMALE  
ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN'S ROLES

| Statement                                                                                   | Frye and<br>Dietz (1973) | Thornburg<br>(1974) | Thornburg<br>(1978) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 6. The most important work for a woman is that of a wife and mother.                        | 61                       | 64                  | 78                  |
| 5. A career should be more important to a man than to a woman.                              | 47                       | 53                  | 49                  |
| 3. Affectionate, motherly, housewifely women are more admired by men than are career women. | 41                       | 54                  | 49                  |
| 1. Women are happiest working for men than for other women.                                 | 64                       | 70                  | 62                  |
| 17. Competing with men tends to make a woman less feminine.                                 | 42                       | 59                  | 70                  |
| 15. Women should not work except in cases of economic necessity.                            | 20                       | 51                  | 47                  |
| 7. Men generally like women who are not too intelligent or competitive on the job.          | 43                       | 50                  | 48                  |
| 12. Men are happier when they work for other men rather than for women.                     | 73                       | 91                  | 67                  |

Table 3  
Stereotyping Common Occupations  
among 189 College Women

| Occupation      | Type: <sup>1</sup><br>Percent | Occupation         | Type<br>Percent |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Airline Pilot   | M/87                          | Carpenter          | M/72            |
| Minister        | M/87                          | Barber             | M/70            |
| Truck Driver    | M/85                          | Hairdresser        | F/70            |
| Airline Hostess | F/84                          | Librarian          | F/67            |
| Nurse           | F/84                          | Secretary          | F/67            |
| Teacher         | E/84                          | Telephone Operator | F/63            |
| Lawyer          | M/75                          | Doctor             | E/60            |
| Architect       | M/75                          | Professor          | M/60            |
| Cashier         | F/75                          | Engineer           | M/56            |
| Receptionist    | F/75                          | Stenographer       | F/50            |

<sup>1</sup>F=Female, M=Male, E=Either Sex